



# HOUSING TENANT NEWS

NEWSLETTER OF TENANTS PROTECTION ASSOCIATION (CHCH) INC

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## From the Desk of ... Helen, TPA Co-ordinator

Kia Ora,

Questions of quality... This month a really curly question has evolved into our theme of quality.

Recently we were asked if rental conditions were better or worse than they were ten years ago? It was an "aha" moment question where we snapped out of the usual busy state of community work to realise we were really not sure of the answer.

Off the top of my head I had to say in reply, that my own sense was that a lot of rental stock of ten years ago had not had anything done to it in the last decade. Add to that the other huge changes in the housing market, the boom the bust, the soaring cost of living for the basics like food and heat and the answer becomes even murkier.

A bit like Charles Dickens it has been a case of being both the best and worst of times. It really did make us stop and take stock when we realised that when it comes to rental conditions, the march of progress has stalled on many fronts for quite a few years.

There is a whole set of sub-issues floating around the big picture issue of rental property standards.

Top of the charts would be the old hardy perennial issue of just how to quantify quality standards to arrive at a benchmark for rental properties. Without sounding too much of a policy wonk, I'd have to say that the present Residential Tenancy Act lacks real clarity when it comes down to defining what a reasonable standard of quality is.

At risk of also sounding rather historic myself, I'd

have to say that in many ways the old 1947 Home Improvements Act was better on this issue than what we have now. Another sub-issue with the quality debate is about acknowledging the reality that if we come up with some high benchmark for quality we may create another set of problems. There are people in our community who are better off in poor quality shelter they can almost afford than in none at all. Their needs also merit consideration. However when we stopped to take stock of where rental conditions have headed, we ended up coming down on the side of the idea of developing a warrant of fitness system for rental housing. It's not new; there have been people like Kevin Riley from the Manawatu Tenants Union calling for this idea for years.

With the General Election producing its usual swarms of feverishly friendly politicians, with a light glazing of policy on offer it might well be time to beat the quality drum a little harder.

The reality is that while they chase the votes of middle New Zealanders those on the margins also need to have their voices heard.

The old and the poor, the young and the poor, the people "mainstreamed" out of mental health care and into the shark-infested waters of the world of life

at the bottom of society. Even the ill and the elderly in Council rental housing who have had their rents hiked at a time when just about every other basic cost of life has soared. Maybe it's just us little people who have the time to notice how people stop in front of the meat and dairy sections at the supermarket, look puzzled, shrug and move on to buy something still within their reach. I have an uneasy hunch that when we really look at that old rule of thumb for judging society, how we treat the

most vulnerable and powerless, none of us are going to take much pride in the results.

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